# A Framework for Contemplating and Redesigning an Undergraduate Business Core

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*Revisiting the core body of knowledge delivered to undergraduate students is prudent for all business schools. Factors that influence periodic reassessment include evolving learning goals, accreditation standards, professional requirements, technological change, and the generational dynamics of contemporary students. This paper presents a benchmarking approach that a task force at Stockton University adopted to redesign its undergraduate business core curriculum. The ultimate goals of the task force were to impart a relevant core body of knowledge to students; alignment with the expectations of prospective employers in terms of business knowledge, competencies, and skills; and, support for university-wide and undergraduate business program learning goals as well as AACSB standards.*

*Keywords: curriculum, undergraduate, business*

## INTRODUCTION

The core body of knowledge in any undergraduate business program warrants reassessment periodically based on evolving learning goals, accreditation standards, professional requirements, technological change, and the generational dynamics of contemporary students. This paper presents a benchmarking approach that a task force at Stockton University adopted to redesign its undergraduate business core curriculum. In the academic year 2016-2017, the task force was formed to reevaluate the business core curriculum given the recent accreditation by AACSB and in light of the fact that it had not been revisited for several years. Other anecdotal concerns included stale curriculum, the need for improved writing instruction, and concerns about technology preparedness.

It is an ongoing challenge for business schools to maintain a core curriculum that is both timely and relevant given finite resources at most institutions. Although business schools tend to place an emphasis on discipline-specific knowledge, this approach is short-sighted (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008). Alternatively, synthesizing common body of knowledge courses (Pharr, 2000) may eliminate topical

redundancies (Walker & Black, 2000). Two positive outcomes of the latter approach are consolidating curriculum requirements and addressing resource issues.

The competencies that business graduates should develop and those sought by employers have been examined by many studies (Harper, 1987; Tanyel, Mitchell, & McAlum, 1999; Abraham, Karns, Shaw, & Mena, 2001; Abraham & Karns, 2009; and Wickramasinghe & De Zoyza, 2009). In a comprehensive study of undergraduate business curricula between 1955 and 2010, Herrington and Arnold (2013) present a list of common competencies desired by employers: Business expertise, communication skills, creativity, customer focus, ethics/integrity, flexibility, interpersonal skills, leadership, motivation and commitment to firm, problem solving, quality focus, risk taking, team work, technical expertise, time management, and work ethic. They point out that the business core courses of 2010 generally address the competencies related to communications, analytical skills, and business expertise, but not the remaining competencies sought by employers. The survey research by Abraham and Karns (2009) shows that some of the competencies businesses identify as essential to being a successful manager are not emphasized in the business curricula.

With these findings in mind, the task force at Stockton University attempted to redesign a business core curriculum that aligned with shifts in curriculum offerings at competitive schools, desired learning goals and employers' expectations. The remainder of this paper discusses the process for revisiting and reshaping the undergraduate business core curriculum, which includes formation of the task force, setting objectives, establishing a framework for research and analysis, developing the report, faculty deliberation, and subsequent outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Business schools have been criticized for not delivering a timely curriculum and failing to provide students with a holistic understanding about how organizations function. Although business schools have largely responded by integrating discipline-specific knowledge into business curriculum, the integration is often disruptive, costly, and fraught with pitfalls (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008). Moreover, due to their limited capacity for change, business schools may be unable to meet rising institutional pressures to commit to effective management education (Gilbert & Rasche, 2015). Creating integrated versions of common body of knowledge courses (Pharr, 2000) which eliminates redundancy in the coverage of topical material (Walker & Black, 2000) may be one avenue for streamlining curriculum and addressing resource issues.

Anecdotally, schools strive to develop a business core that can provide a point of difference in the competitive sphere. This was the premise of an empirical study that proposed use of specific strategic management tools to identify opportunities for gaining competitive advantage in the business core curricula at colleges and universities. It was found that a competitive edge can be achieved by improving innovation and distinctiveness in a business core through content and/or teaching methods (Alstete, 2013).

A few studies investigate the skills and competencies that a business curriculum should address in the global markets (Gill & Lashine, 2003; Abraham & Karns, 2009; Herrington & Arnold, 2013.) From a market-oriented perspective, Gill and Lashine (2003) argue that business education should develop students' skills and knowledge for today's global business environment, including: technical skills, analytical skills, communication skills, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary skills, and knowledge of global issues. Abraham and Karns (2009) surveyed businesses and business schools on the competencies they identify as being essential for successful managers and graduates, respectively, and the competencies that are emphasized in business curricula. Abraham and Karns (2009) found that some of the competencies businesses identify as necessary to being a successful manager are not emphasized in the business curricula.

This suggests that in addition to offering a core curriculum that is on par with competitors, business schools should try to include the competencies sought by employers as well. This was evidenced in a comprehensive study of undergraduate business curricula between 1955 and 2010, insofar as Herrington

and Arnold (2013) found that the credit hours in business core courses were greater in 2010. Three courses, Information Systems, Business Communications, and a management course (separate from Business Policy), were added to the original eight business core courses listed in Pierson (1959). Herrington and Arnold (2013) further point out that the business core courses of 2010 generally address the competencies related to communications, analytical skills, and business expertise, but not the remaining competencies sought by employers. The Stockton University task force cautiously kept these findings in mind as they moved towards redesigning a business core curriculum that is both relevant and distinctive.

## OBJECTIVES

The purpose of reexamining and recommending changes to the core curriculum was multifaceted. First, the faculty have an obligation to impart a core body of knowledge that will provide a strong foundation for the degree as well as ample preparation for entry-level positions in the business field. Second, core courses should adequately educate students who minor in business as well as the 19 majors at Stockton University from the respective Schools of Arts and Humanities, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Education, Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Health Sciences that specify one or more core business courses be taken at-a-distance. Third, the core curriculum should align with the expectations of prospective employers in terms of business knowledge, competencies and skills. Finally, the core curriculum should support Stockton's essential learning outcomes (ELOs), business program learning goals, and AACSB standards.

## THE TASK FORCE PROCESS

The process spanned almost two years and included two main components. First, a rigorous critique of the undergraduate business programs at 16 schools considered directly competitive to Stockton was undertaken. The list of competitive schools was provided by Stockton University's Office of Enrollment Management and included Fairleigh Dickinson University, Kean University, Monmouth University, Montclair State University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Ramapo College of New Jersey, Rider University, Rowan University, Rutgers University, Seton Hall University, St. Joseph's University, Temple University, The College of New Jersey, University of Delaware, Widener University, and William Paterson University. Specific goals encompassed a comprehensive review of core curriculum that included overall content, titles, descriptions and credits; general education, and at-some-distance core course requirements (e.g., Economics might be classified as a business core course or as a general education course); and, highlighting parallels as well as notable differences. Second, essential skills and competencies sought by employers nationally and in New Jersey were researched. This included both qualitative and quantitative research studies.

## FINDINGS

At the time the task force process was launched, Stockton University's 12 business core courses (48 credits) were Statistics (4), Introduction to Macroeconomics (4), Introduction to Microeconomics (4), Financial Accounting (4), Managerial Accounting (4), Quantitative Business Methods (4), Introduction to Management (4), Marketing Principles (4), Business Law (4), Introduction to Financial Management (4), Operations Management (4), and Business Policy and Strategies (4). Note that Stockton University is on a 4-credit system.

The entire business program core curriculum was compared and contrasted with every one of the 16 competitive schools. The cores were very similar in most cases insofar as the same courses (albeit titled differently) were included. Notable differences were that five of the schools required that "Macroeconomics" and/or "Microeconomics" be taken at-a-distance; nine of the schools did not require "Quantitative Business Methods"; alternative titles to "Introduction to Management" included the words

organizational behavior and/or leadership; and, the capstone course at Stockton, "Business Policy & Strategies" was entitled "Strategic Management" at six of the schools researched.

Other significant curriculum findings were that all of the schools researched included an information technology or [management] information systems course in the core, and five schools required two courses; six of the schools required an international business course; four schools required an ethics course; a few schools required a business writing course; and, two required a course in business analytics. Moreover, all of the schools with the exception of two were on a 3-credit system and a few required 1-credit courses in Excel and career planning. Notably, the Anisfield School of Business of Ramapo College of New Jersey has transitioned from a conventional writing across the curriculum to a writing across the business core approach that involves specific sequencing (Hutchins, 2015).

The second wave of the core curriculum reassessment involved identifying the primary skills and competencies sought by employers. Three large-scale, national studies that focused on work place readiness for undergraduate and/or graduate students (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Levy and Cannon, 2016; National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.) and an empirical study that researched skills and competencies sought by New Jersey businesses (Holtzman & Kraft, 2016) provided important insights. Consolidated results indicated that the most valued skills sought by employers included leadership, teamwork/ability to collaborate, written communication, problem solving/decision-making, and oral communication. Similarly, the five most important skills sought by recruiters across all industries included communication, analytical thinking, work collaboratively, strategic thinking, and leadership.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The task force recognized the process as an opportunity for the Business Studies Program to be innovative through the potential integration of technology and analytics into the core. This would benefit students greatly. Further, the process allows the program to evaluate how it can best address student detriments in the areas of writing, technology, critical thinking, etc. So with these general conclusions in mind, the task force recommended the following as potential changes to the core:

- Eliminate "Quantitative Business Methods" and collapse relevant content into "Operations Management"
- Add an "Information Technology" course (recommend as an upper-level business course)
- Add a "Business Analytics" course (recommend an upper level business course)
- Consider adding a "Business Communications" course that would encompass oral and written communication or have students take a comparable course at-a-distance
- Change some of the core course titles to align with what is being done at the other schools and valued in practice
- Ladder skills like writing into the core curriculum
- Recommend that students take "Statistics," "Macroeconomics" and/or "Microeconomics" as at-a-distance or general education requirement; this is feasible given the fact that the Economics Program is housed within the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Stockton
- Contemplate adding an "International Business" course to the core
- Three sub-task forces will continue the work to implement the recommendations, and the undergraduate business core curriculum will be reevaluated every three years in the future.

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